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Qualcomm's Road a Little Less Traveled

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Stewing in morning and afternoon traffic is a necessary evil for many San Diegans who work outside their neighborhoods.

To lessen the impact of tired, irritable employees on company profits, some businesses offer special programs designed to ease commuter woes. And according to one federal agency, none does it better in San Diego than Sorrento Valley-based Qualcomm Inc.

The San Diego Association of Governments announced Oct. 19 that Qualcomm tied for second with Bay Area-based Oracle in the Environmental Protection Agency's annual list of the Top 20 Best Workplaces for Commuters, which ranks Fortune 500 companies on such things as transit subsidies, telecommuting options and on-site services, such as day care and dry cleaning.

"I would characterize Qualcomm as a good example for other companies," said Gary Gallegos, the executive director of Sandag. "They are certainly leading the pack."

The EPA also recognized San Diego-based Becton Dickinson and Co. and Sony Online Entertainment, which has its headquarters in San Diego, though neither made the top 20 list.

Although no other San Diego companies ranked as high as Qualcomm, some other locally based agencies and organizations were also recognized this month by the EPA. Those groups are Sandag, the San Diego Air Pollution Control District and Flexcar-Southern California.

Why Help Is Needed

San Diego as a region consistently ranks in another less-favorable Top 20 list — the worst areas for traffic congestion, which was handed down by the Texas Transportation Institute. The ranking is based largely on the amount of time commuters sit in traffic because of delays. In San Diego, the report found that drivers traveling during peak commuting hours wastes about 15 hours a year sitting in delayed traffic.

Wasted idle time leads to wasted gas, which has dipped slightly in price the last two weeks but continues to be more costly than a year ago.

Nationally, the average price for self-serve unleaded gasoline has dropped 9 cents since mid-September, but it is nearly up 75 cents from a year ago, according to report released Oct. 18 by the American Automobile Association. Residents of California currently pay the third highest price for gas with an average of \$2.92 a gallon. Hawaii is paying the most at \$3.49 a gallon,

followed by Washington, D.C., at \$2.95.

The cheapest gas in San Diego County as of last week could be found primarily in East and North counties, ranging between \$2.70 and \$2.80 a gallon.

The Qualcomm Way

Founded in 1985 as a six-person communications technology company, Qualcomm now has a little more than 7,000 employees in San Diego County and reports annual revenues around \$5 billion.

Human Resources Manager David Beadle, who oversees company programs dealing in work/life balance issues, said Qualcomm's commuter-friendly attitude has evolved in time.

"Pretty much it kind of grew and evolved during the past 10 years or so," Beadle said. "It started pretty much with telecommuting and then transit subsidies were added and now it's just so many things that make up the overall program."

On average, Qualcomm spent about \$3,500 in transit subsidies to its employees either to cover vanpool costs or to pay for local bus tickets, Amtrak passes and the Coaster, the commuter rail between Oceanside and Downtown San Diego. Qualcomm also maintains two Flexcars in the company parking lot that are used by employees who come into work without their own vehicles. Workers can request to use the Flexcars to run an errand at lunch, go to a midday doctor's appointment or pick up a sick child at school. A small rental fee is charged by the hour that includes gas and insurance costs and is significantly less than traditional rental car agreements, said Charity Lacey, marketing coordinator for Sandag's RideLink program, which works closely with Qualcomm on many of its commuter-friendly programs.

On average, the Flexcars get used several hundred times a month, Beadle said.

Qualcomm's commuter-friendly programs also include on-site medical care, a mobile dental service, internal hybrid-powered shuttle services and bike lockers.

Beadle said he couldn't estimate how much Qualcomm spends a year on its commuter-friendly programs but that it is a "fairly substantial investment."

Likewise, he couldn't quantify how much direct impact the programs have had on productivity and retention rates.

"We really don't have a measurable marker," Beadle said. "But I think what we are seeing is increasing participation and a noticeable change in the appearance of our employees, who are arriving less stressed and happier, and from that we can assume everything else is improving, too."

Permanent Relief

As a consistently ranked top 20 nationwide nightmare for traffic congestion, San Diego as a whole needs more than the occasional van-pool opportunity if real permanent relief is ever to be seen, say local transportation planners.

Sandag's Gallegos said it's going to take road improvements as well as companies like Qualcomm to make a dent in San Diego's traffic problem.

"Historically, one of our weaknesses has been that we've been extremely incremental in our approach (to freeway construction and repair)," Gallegos said. "We finish one leg of a freeway project and then shift the problem further up the road. Nowadays, we're really pushing to change that."

Gallegos points to expanding efforts on Interstate 15 as a test case for Sandag's new approach to transportation planning. A stretch roughly between Lake Hodges and Poway is on track to be finished in late 2007. Rather than let any time pass between that project and one targeting the stretch north of it through Escondido to where state Route 78 meets I-15, Gallegos said there will be an immediate shift in efforts designed to keep the overall project's momentum up. Before that stretch is done, crews will backtrack to the portion of I-15 between Poway and the state Route 163 split with the goal of finishing a full 20-mile corridor improvement by 2011.

While that stretch is expected to bring relief once completed, programs encouraging vanpools, mass transit and other commuter-friendly programs will still have a place in San Diego, Gallegos said.

"Absolutely, we know even though we plan and try and do more with the roads, the region needs are still growing and these programs are important," he said. "It's not just about building roads. It's about meeting people's needs from every angle possible because it's good for the quality of life in the region and from that, good for business."

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